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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to identify developmental trends in children's understanding of pity, anger, and guilt by examining changes in their reasoning about the causes of these emotions. Specifically, relationships between perceived controllability of negative events and these three emotions were examined. A total of 120 children between the ages of 6 and 11, evenly divided by sex, were asked to recall personal experiences of pity, anger, and guilt and to rate the cause of each emotion on degree of controllability. (Guilt was included as a variable in the study because research with adults indicates this emotion is primarily elicited when causes of negative events are controllable.) Thus, pity/uncontrollability, anger/controllability, and guilt/controllability causal linkages were investigated. Children were interviewed individually by one of four female experimenters who adhered to an established script. Results indicate systematic relationships between pity/uncontrollability and anger/controllability among all age groups. In addition, a developmental increase was found in the linkage of guilt to controllable causes of negative events. Because of its closer link with outcome than with perceived controllability, guilt in young children, in contrast to pity and anger, is interpreted as being a qualitatively different and cognitively less complex emotion. (Author/RH)

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Children's Perceptions of Relations Between Controllability and Anger, Pity, and Guilt

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Abstract

The development of causal thought-emotion linkages from an attributional perspective was investigated. Specifically, in this research the relations between perceived controllability of negative events and the emotions of pity, anger, and guilt were examined. Children between the ages of 6 and 11 were asked to recall personal experiences of pity, anger, and guilt and to rate the cause of each emotion on degree of controllability. There were systematic relations between pity-uncontrollability and anger-controllability among all age groups. In addition, there was a developmental increase in the linkage of guilt to controllable causes of negative events. The results were interpreted as evidence that guilt in young children may be a qualitatively different and cognitively less complex emotion.

The Development of Relations Between Perceived Controllability and the Emotions of Pity, Anger, and Guilt

Psychologists who study emotional development have begun to recognize the central role of cognition in the growth of children's emotional lives. A number of investigators have identified relations between the child's capacity to experience emotions and the development of cognitive capabilities such as, for example, role taking and decentration (Hoffman, 1978; Harter, Miner, & Connell, Note 1). In the research reported here, cognition-emotion relations also are investigated by examining the influence of causal attributions on emotional development. An attributional approach to emotional development is guided by the belief that cognitions (causal attributions) precede or alter the experience and understanding of a prevalent set of emotions that includes pity, anger, and guilt (see Weiner & Graham, in press). Hence, developmental differences in the experience and understanding of these emotions are due to age-related changes in the linkages between causal thoughts and emotional experiences.

The development of specific relations between causal thoughts and emotions has already been documented in the achievement domain. Weiner, Kun, and Benesh-Weiner (1980) distinguished two kinds of emotional reactions to achievement outcomes that differ according to the complexity of the thoughts eliciting them. First, there are outcome-dependent affective reactions to success and failure, such as happy and sad, that appear to arise regardless of the cause of the outcome. In addition, there are emotions discriminatively linked to specific causal attributions, such as feeling guilty when failure is due to lack of effort or experiencing gratitude for success attributed to help from others. Weiner et al. (1980) reported that 6-year-olds preferred to use happy and sad to explain a

hypothetical child's reaction to success and failure given particular attributional cues. Ten-year-olds, on the other hand, used the same cues to infer attribution-linked emotions such as gratitude and guilt. The authors suggested that young children might tend to rely on outcome-dependent emotions because these emotions are cognitively less complex - that is, they are not determined by the assignment of causal responsibility.

There also is evidence that some attribution-emotion relations are understood earlier than others. If causal thoughts determine or change emotional experience, then children's knowledge of specific attributions should influence their affective understanding. In a recent investigation that examined this hypothesis, Weiner, Graham, Stern, and Lawson (1982) found that relations between a teacher emotional reaction of anger and attributions for student failure to lack of effort were perceived by children as young as age 5. However, only children 9 years of age and older perceived a link between teacher pity and low ability attributions. It is well documented in the literature on attributional development that the concept of effort emerges earlier in children than the concept of ability (see Nicholls, 1978). The attributional approach suggests that children's developing understanding of anger and pity in achievement contexts is directly influenced by their knowledge of causal thoughts concerning effort and ability.

In studies examining the characteristics of causal thoughts rather than specific causes per se, pity and anger also have been linked to the perceived controllability of events. Controllability refers to whether or not one is personally responsible for the occurrence of an event. For example, lack of effort is perceived as a controllable cause of outcomes since individuals are believed to be personally responsible for how hard they try. Low ability, on the other hand, is generally perceived to be beyond one's personal control. In adult reseach, pity is elicited given a broad class

of uncontrollable negative outcomes, while anger is aroused when the causes of events are controllable (Weiner, Graham, & Chandler, 1982).

The investigation reported here examined the development of the relations between perceived controllability and emotional experiences. Children between the ages of 6 and 11 were asked to recall personal experiences of pity and anger and to rate the cause of each emotion on degree of controllability. In addition, to extend the range of emotions to which the analysis might apply, children also were asked to report and make causal judgments about incidents of experienced guilt. Guilt was included because there is evidence in adult research that this emotion primarily is elicited given controllable causes of negative events (Weiner, Graham, & Chandler, 1982). Thus, pity-uncontrollability, anger-controllability, and guilt-controllability causal linkages were investigated. Guided by the attributional perspective presented here, the purpose of the study was to identify developmental trends in children's understanding of pity, anger, and guilt by examining changes in their reasoning about the causes of these emotions.

Method

Subjects

Participants were 120 children attending a university-affiliated, non-graded elementary school. The children were divided into three age groups of 40 each: 6- and 7-year-olds (M = 6.9 years), 8- and 9-year-olds (M = 9.1 years), and 11-year-olds (M = 11.8 years). Within each age group, the children were evenly divided by sex. Of the initial 120 subjects, 19 children, approximately equally distributed across age groups and by sex, were discarded because they could not recall one or more incidents of experienced emotion. These subjects were replaced by children of the same age and sex.

Procedure

Children were interviewed individually by one of four female experimenters who adhered to an established script. The experimenter introduced herself as someone "interested in how kids your age think and feel about different things that happen to them." As a preliminary exercise, children were asked to recall a time when they felt happy and at this point they were introduced to the rating scale that measured degree of controllability. The scale was drawn to represent a horizontal road along which children could move their pencil, stop wherever they wished, and mark an "X" to indicate their answer. Subjects then were given practice in the use of the rating scale to insure that they understood its meaning.

Following this training phase, children were asked to recall personal experiences of pity, anger, and guilt ("Tell me about a time when you felt _____"). The order of presentation of emotions was counterbalanced. Since pity and anger are conceptualized as other-directed emotions from an attributional perspective, children specifically were requested to describe incidents of experienced pity for and anger toward someone else. Consistent with a procedure followed by Weiner, Graham, Stern, and Lawson (1982), the phrase "felt sorry for" was used in place of "pity" for all children. In addition, the verbal label "ashamed" was employed along with "guilty" for 26 children in the youngest age group to clarify the meaning of guilt. While the theoretical distinction between shame and guilt is acknowledged (Izard, 1977), preliminary analyses revealed no differences in controllability ratings between the 6-7-year-olds given both "guilty" and "ashamed" and those who responded only to "guilty" ($t < 1$). Thus, the use of the verbal label "ashamed" did not appear to differentially influence the guilt responses of the youngest age group.

For each incident recalled, children first were asked whether the cause of the emotion was controllable or uncontrollable by oneself (guilt) or by the target of the emotion (pity and anger). The controllability question was worded as follows: "Was [cause of emotion] mostly something that you (target) made happen or mostly something that you (target) couldn't stop from happening?" As a check on comprehension, children were asked to state the reason for their response ("Why do you think that?"). Based on the reasons given, there was no indication that any age group had difficulty understanding the meaning of controllability as it was operationalized in this investigation.

Children then rated the cause of the emotion on degree of controllability. Ratings were elicited by asking children, "Where on my special road would you stop and put your "X" to show me how much [cause of emotion] was something you (target) made happen, something you (target) couldn't stop from happening, or partly something you (target) made happen and partly something you (target) couldn't stop from happening?" While posing this question, the experimenter pointed to the anchors and midpoint of the rating scale, respectively labeled "made it happen - couldn't stop it from happening" and "partly". For scoring purposes, the scales subsequently were divided into nine equal intervals.

Each experimenter interviewed approximately an equal number of boys and girls from the three age groups. The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed.

Results

Preliminary analyses revealed no effects of experimenter or sex of subject. Therefore, experimenter and sex are not included as factors in subsequent analyses.

Children's ratings of the causes of emotion on degree of controllability are presented in Table 1. It is evident that among all age groups, children

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Insert Table 1 about here

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perceive the cause of anger as controllable and the cause of pity as uncontrollable by the targets of the emotion. Only with increasing age, however, do children report that guilt is experienced for personally controllable causes. A 3 (emotion) X 3 (age) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on the first factor yields a significant Emotion X Age interaction, F (4, 232) = 3.42, $p < .01$. ANOVAs within each emotion show a main effect of age on controllability ratings only for guilt, F (2, 117) = 8.34, $p < .001$. Given this emotion, mean controllability ratings of 6-7-year-olds are significantly lower than the ratings of 9- and 11-year-olds; respectively, t (117) = 2.90, $p < .01$; t (117) = 3.94, $p < .001$.

ANOVAs within, rather than between, age groups reveal main effects of emotion for all ages: 6-7-year-olds, F (2, 78) = 13.00; 9-year-olds, F (2, 78) = 36.19; and 11-year-olds, F (2, 78) = 30.49 (all p's $< .0001$). Among the 6-7-year olds, the cause of pity is rated as more uncontrollable than the cause of anger, t (39) = 5.39, $p < .0001$, but not more uncontrollable than the cause of guilt, t (39) = 1.62, ns. Among 9-year-olds, however, pity is more uncontrollable than both anger, t(39) = 9.72, and guilt, t (39) = 5.99 (both p's $< .0001$). In other words, guilt is conceptually similar to pity among 6-7-year-olds while guilt and anger are conceptually grouped among 9-year-olds. The pattern of results for 11-year-olds is identical to that for 9-year-olds: the cause of pity is rated as more uncontrollable

than both the cause of anger, t (39) = 6.84, and the cause of guilt, t (39) = 5.93 (both p's < .0001).

In sum, the controllability ratings reveal a systematic pattern to children's judgments about the causal antecedents of pity, anger, and guilt. The linkage of pity to uncontrollable causes and anger to controllable causes is displayed by all age groups. There also is evidence of a developmental increase in children's perception of a guilt-controllability association.

Discussion

One goal of this investigation was to further document the usefulness of an attributional approach to emotional development. The findings presented here both extend and clarify the prior research. The fact that the causes of anger were perceived as controllable by all age groups replicates Weiner, Graham, Stern, and Lawson (1982) who documented that even 5-year-olds understand the linkage between anger and lack of effort, a controllable cause for failure. The absence of a developmental trend for pity-uncontrollability in the present study indicates that children as young as age 6 understand and experience this emotion. Weiner, Graham, Stern, and Lawson (1982) suggested that children's understanding of pity and their capacities to reason accurately about this emotion did not emerge before middle childhood, thus following the same developmental course as their understanding of ability. It now appears that it is not the concept of pity that undergoes developmental change, but rather it is specific attribution-pity relations that emerge with age. If young children do not perceive ability as uncontrollable, as some researchers have reported (see Weisz, 1981), then it is not likely that they will perceive a low ability-pity linkage. When the context for experiencing the emotion is familiar and the

eliciting thoughts are clearly uncontrollable, as in the self-reports of the present study, then 6-year-olds apparently have the same concept of pity as older children.

In contrast to pity and anger, developmental differences observed for guilt responses indicated that the youngest children did not systematically link this emotion to controllable causes. Examination of the content of children's reports of guilt-eliciting incidents suggests a possible explanation for this developmental trend. All children reported feeling guilty for a generalized class of behavior that can be described as wrongdoing. However, what distinguised the youngest from the older age groups was the unintentional nature of the accounts of 6- and 7-year-olds who perceived the cause of guilt as uncontrollable. These children typically experienced guilt for accidental outcomes ("when my brother and I had boxing gloves on and I hit him too hard...sometimes I don't know my own strength"), or for forgetting to carry out a prescribed rule of behavior. In contrast, older children most often reported feeling guilty for clearly intentional wrongdoing such as ignoring one's responsibilityes ("when I didn't turn in my homework because I was too lazy to do it"), cheating, or lying.

This pattern of responses suggests that the elicitation of guilt in young children may be more outcome-dependent than mediated by perceived controllability. There is some support for this interpretation in a separate but closely related area of research. A well-documented finding in the moral development literature is that the moral judgments of preoperational children often are based more on objective outcome information than on intentionality, particularly when accidental or well-intentioned acts have negative consequences (see review in Karniol, 1978). In addition, Thompson and Ferris (Note 2) recently reported that second graders' inferences about

guilt in others were just as likely to be based on outcome as on attributions for an event. Thus there is suggestive evidence that guilt in young children may be a qualitatively different and cognitively less complex emotion because of its closer link to outcome than to perceived controllability. While 6-year-olds have the capacity to experience guilt, with increasing age the cognitive linkage between guilt and controllability is believed to develop and alter the conditions under which the emotion will be elicited.

If the relations between causal thoughts and guilt reactions differ between younger and older children, one wonders whether the intensity of their emotional experiences also differ. This question has not previously been addressed since developmentalists have tended to concentrate on the cognitive antedecents of guilt rather than focus on the emotional experience itself (Hoffman, 1978; Thompson & Hoffman, 1980). In adult research, Weiner, Russell, and Lerman (1979) speculated that outcome-dependent emotions are of higher intensity and shorter duration than attribution-linked emotions. If this is the case, then the guilt experiences of young children should be intense but relatively transient compared to the guilt experiences of older children and adults. Examination of the nature of affective experiences from an attributional-developmental perspective is a useful topic for future research.

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Footnotes

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Table 1

Mean Controllability Ratings as a Function of Emotion and Age

	Age		
Emotion	6-7 (n = 40)	9 (n = 40)	11 (n = 40)
Anger	6.1	6.9	7.1
Guilt	3.9	5.9	6.7
Pity	2.9	2.4	2.8

Note. High ratings indicate high perceived controllability.